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BEP 126 – Meetings: Discussing a Problem (Part 1)

Welcome back to Business English Pod. My name's Edwin and I'll be your host for the first in a two-part series on running and participating in a problem-solving meeting.

One of the most common reasons for holding a meeting is to solve a problem. A meeting can be a great place to do this, because it is possible for a variety of people with different experiences and perspectives to work together to identify the problem and come up with possible solutions.

But, while we might have the right people at the meeting, the process is often flawed because one question hasn't clearly been asked and answered: "What *is* the problem?" So, in today's episode we're going to focus on how to define the problem through discussion and then restate the problem as a challenge. In the second part of this series, we'll look at how to evaluate and eliminate suggestions and then agree on a plan of action.



We'll be listening to Kathryn, the head of Human Resources at a medium-sized company, who is meeting with department heads to discuss a problem they're having with low staff morale across all departments of the company. Morale is a word used to describe a general feeling or mood.

Kathryn wants everyone to consider possible hidden reasons for low morale at the company. We'll see how she helps participants focus on breaking down the morale problem. As the dialog starts, Kathryn calls everyone to attention and begins the meeting.

Listening Questions

- 1) What is the surface problem that Kathryn and the others can see?

- 2) What does the group decide is the true cause of this problem?

- 3) What is the challenge that the group faces at the end of the dialog?

Vocabulary

To get to grips with something: to deal with a problem. Also “to come to grips with something”. “I can’t come to grips with why we went over budget.”

To come back to bite somebody: to cause problems at a later time. “Being rude to your staff can come back to bite you someday.”

Root cause/underlying cause: the hidden reason for something. “It may take a long time to find the root cause of a conflict on the factory floor.”

Who-knows-where: A common ‘placeholder’ when you are unsure of the location of someone or something. “Francis is always traveling. Yesterday he was in Brazil, today he’s going to New York and tomorrow who-knows-where he’ll be.”

To bump into somebody: to meet somebody you know by chance. “I bumped into one of our suppliers at the annual convention.”

To hear somebody out: to listen to every detail. “Hear me out: I can tell you exactly why the program failed.”

To be onto something: close to making an important discovery. “She could be onto something big with her new idea for a joint venture.”

To pinpoint something: to locate or identify with precision. “We can’t pinpoint the source of the error, but it’s probably in the original product design.”

Something you can sink your teeth into: something that you can be enthusiastic about doing. Also “something to sink your teeth into”. “He’ll be much more motivated now that he’s got something to sink his teeth into.”

To throw out ideas: to freely propose ideas. “There’s no way I’m going to throw out ideas when they’re just waiting to criticize my input.”

To tackle something: to start or to deal with something. “He’ll tackle the audit as soon as he gets the files.”

To get out of hand: to become uncontrollable. “We need to control departmental spending before it gets out of hand.”

A fortune: a lot of money. “The new assembly line cost a fortune.” “We spent a fortune on consultants’ fees last year.”

Dialog

Kathryn: Okay everybody, let's get started. (pause) I think we've all noticed that **staff morale** is extremely low.

All: Murmurs of agreement.

Kathryn: We've got to **get to grips with** this before it **comes back to bite us**. To start with, what exactly is the problem? Is it budget cuts, the economy, or are we missing something? Let's have some input.

Neil: Well, look at the economy. Who wouldn't be depressed?

Natalie: I'm **not sure I follow**. Could you explain?

Paul: I think he means that people are nervous. We've had budget cuts and lay-offs and everyone's... (fade out)

Kathryn: (fade in)... economy affects everybody, BUT morale is worse here than other places and I, for one, would like to know the **root cause**.

Bill: Actually, it seems obvious to me – lack of personal contact. Neil's on Bleaker Street, Torben is **who-knows-where** – I have to take a cab just to file expenses! I **bumped into** Sarah the other day and she said "Howdy, stranger!"

Neil: You know, I don't see what you're getting at.

Kathryn: **Hang on**, let's hear Bill out.

Bill: Well, two years ago, when we were expanding, we rented offices in other locations and we all got spread out.

Paul: Yeah, I remember that. I used to see Neil's team every day, but we email now.

Neil: **Absolutely**. My department moved and I only see you folks at meetings.

Kathryn: I think we're **onto something** here. We've **pinpointed** the underlying cause of low morale. Let's define it as due to a lack of face-to-face contact.

All: (Murmurs of agreement)

Natalie: So, let's state it as a challenge. How can we improve morale, without spending **a fortune**?

Bill: Exactly. (Murmurs of agreement)

Kathryn: Good, we've got something we can really **sink our teeth into**. Time for some brainstorming. To start off with, I'd like everyone to just **throw out some ideas**. Okay?

Neil: Here's one, how about if we...

Debrief

Let's look in detail at some of the language and expressions that focus the problem-solving process in this meeting.

Notice how Kathryn gets straight to the point right at the beginning. Any "small talk" among the participants has already taken place and she immediately directs their attention to the problem at hand.

Kathryn: Okay everybody, let's get started. (pause) I think we've all noticed that **staff morale** is extremely low.

All: Murmurs of agreement.

Staff morale refers to the mood of the staff, or the way they are feeling in general. Kathryn says "I think..." to start off, because it is a soft way of introducing an unpleasant or negative idea. She includes the meeting participants in her opening statement by saying "we've all noticed this problem.". By using "we", she is including everyone and saying "We're all in this together."

Here are some other phrases to use for introducing a problem.

- Well, let's turn to a problem that's on everyone's mind.
- So, we need to tackle a fairly pressing problem today.
- I know we've all been discussing this particular issue recently.
- As you all know, we're going to look at the problem of...

Now listen to the way Kathryn focuses the discussion. She states how serious the problem is and starts to break the problem down.

Kathryn: We've got to **get to grips** with this before it **comes back to bite us**. To start with, what exactly is the problem? Is it budget cuts, the economy, or are we missing something? Let's have some input.

Kathryn emphasizes how serious the problem is by saying they must *get to grips* with the problem, meaning deal with the problem. She is worried morale could get worse in future, so she says the problem may *come back to bite us*. She asks a direct question about the problem, makes some suggestions for possible underlying reasons and asks everyone to participate by giving *input*, or suggestions.

What else can we say to focus discussion on a problem? Let's practice a few more expressions. Notice that many of them are questions.

- We need to deal with this problem before it gets out of hand.
- What are the underlying causes of the problem? Anne, what can you tell us?
- What is at the root of this problem? Any suggestions?
- Perhaps we can begin by breaking down the problem? Who can start?

As soon as there's an opportunity to make suggestions, Neil speaks up. He asks a *rhetorical question*, which he doesn't expect anyone to answer. This technique is often used to imply that the idea is obvious, but Natalie doesn't understand what Neil means.

Neil: Well, look at the economy. **Who wouldn't be depressed?**

Natalie: I'm **not sure I follow**. Could you explain?

Neil's contribution isn't very clear, is it? He hasn't shown a direct relationship between the economy and low staff morale. Natalie politely asks for clarification, saying that she *can't follow* – that she doesn't understand his statement. Notice how she uses *could* to make the question less direct and less challenging. For more expressions used to clarify what someone else has said, please look at BEP 30 and 31.

After much discussion, Bill brings up an idea that he thinks is obvious, but others haven't mentioned yet:

Bill: Actually, it seems obvious to me – lack of personal contact. Neil's on Bleaker Street, Torben is who-knows-where – I have to take ...

Who-knows-where is a placeholder meaning, "I don't know where he is." Before Bill can fully explain his point, Neil tries to interrupt. How does Kathryn stop Neil and encourage Bill to continue?

Neil: You know, I don't see what... (you're getting at.)

Kathryn: **Hang on**, let's hear Bill out.

Kathryn sees that Bill's idea may have a relationship to the problem of low morale and she wants to hear more. She interrupts Neil by asking him to *hang on* and let Bill finish what he has to say. To make sure a meeting stays on track and achieves its aims, we need to avoid too many interruptions. Here are other ways of minimizing interruptions and letting someone finish their point.

- Hold on, can we let Janine finish?
- Sorry, I think it's important to give everyone a chance to contribute.
- One moment John, perhaps we can allow Fred to continue?
- Just a second, I wonder if we can give Nadine an opportunity to complete that thought?
- Can we just let Sally finish her point? We can discuss objections later.

So, Bill is given a chance to speak, and both Pau and Neil agree with him. They support his position like this:

Paul: Yeah, I remember that. I used to see Neil's team every day, but we email now.

Neil: **Absolutely**. My department moved and I only see you folks at meetings.

Paula expresses mild agreement, while Neil expresses strong agreement by using *Absolutely*.

At this point, Kathryn steps in to confirm that they are heading in the right direction. She uses "we" and "let's" to highlight the fact that they have come to these conclusions as a *group*.

Kathryn: I think we're **onto something** here. We've **pinpointed** the underlying cause of low morale. Let's define it as due to a lack of face-to-face contact.

Kathryn makes it clear that the group is well on its way to finding the true cause of the low morale problem. She encourages them to think of themselves as a team and builds consensus within the team. What other language can we use to highlight and encourage teamwork?

- I think we're on the right track.
- We're definitely on the same wave-length.
- I can tell we're all on the same page.
- We've covered a lot of ground together.

Once the group has agreed on the root cause of low morale, Natalie restates their problem as a challenge, by making it into a "how" question.

Natalie: So, let's state it as a challenge. How can we improve morale without spending a **fortune**?

Bill: Exactly. (Murmurs of agreement)

A *fortune* means "a lot of money". Can you see how the company's challenge is to solve the morale problem without using a lot of money? This type of question asks *how* people can achieve a goal without giving up something important. Listen to these problems stated as challenges:

- How can we meet our deadlines without working overtime?
- How could we cut costs without losing quality?
- How should we approach this problem without offending anyone?
- How can we find the defect without shutting down the factory?

The group has agreed on the underlying cause of low staff morale, and has restated the problem as a challenge. Kathryn indicates that they've finally answered the question, "What **is** the problem?". They have something solid they can work on, or something they can *sink their teeth into*.

Kathryn: Good, we've got something we can really **sink our teeth into**. Time for some brainstorming. To start off with, I'd like everyone to just **throw out some ideas**. Okay?

Neil: Here's one, how about if we...

To start off the brainstorming session, Kathryn encourages everyone to contribute whatever ideas come into their heads. She doesn't want them to be very analytical during brainstorming, but to be relaxed and feel comfortable telling the group their ideas.

Now, it's your turn to practice some of the techniques we've looked at today.

First, let's review the language of *stating a problem as a challenge*. Imagine you are in a problem-solving meeting. You will hear a comment made on a problem issue. You should re-state the problem as a challenge, by using the same information in a question that begins with "How".

For example, if you hear:

Example cue: *The problem is caused by the new equipment. We can't return it.*

You can say:

Example answer: How can we solve the problem without returning the new equipment?

Are you ready? Let's give it a try.

Cue 1: *Logistics is terrible, but we're locked into a contract with this supplier.*

Learner 1: _____

Cue 2: *Quality has gone down since we started outsourcing.*

Learner 2: _____

Cue 3: *We need to reduce office space, but we're too busy to lay anyone off.*

Learner 3: _____

Cue 4: *We must tackle this problem immediately. We don't want to involve the union.*

Learner 4: _____

Now, let's listen to some example answers.

Cue 1: Logistics are terrible, but we're locked into a contract with this supplier.

Answer 1: How can we improve logistics without changing suppliers?

Cue 2: Quality has gone down since we started outsourcing.

Answer 2: How can we continue outsourcing without losing quality?

Cue 3: We need to reduce office space, but we're too busy to lay anyone off.

Answer 3: How can we reduce office space without laying anyone off?

Cue 4: We must tackle this problem immediately. We don't want to involve the union.

Answer 4: How can we tackle this problem without involving the union?

Next, we'll review some of the vocabulary and idioms that we studied in this episode. You'll hear a series of sentences with a verb replaced with a *beep*. Repeat the whole sentence saying the missing word.

For example, if you hear...

Example cue: We've really got to get to **<beep>** with this problem.

You can say:

Example answer: We've really got to get to **grips** with this problem.

After each response, we'll play the correct answer. Let's begin.

Cue 1: I'm afraid this issue will come back to **<beep>** us in future.

Learner 1: _____

Cue 2: We should **<beep>** him out before we criticize his plan.

Learner 2: _____

Cue 3: John could be **<beep>** something when he says the problem is poor communication.

Learner 3: _____

Cue 4: If we can **<beep>** the flaw, we can improve the product.

Learner 4: _____

Cue 5: This project is something you can really **<beep>** your teeth into.

Learner 5: _____

Answer 1: I'm afraid this issue will come back to **bite** us in future.

Answer 2: We should **hear** him out before we criticize his plan.

Answer 3: John could be **onto** something when he says the problem is poor communication.

Answer 4: If we can **pinpoint** the flaw, we can improve the product.

Answer 5: This project is something you can really **sink** your teeth into.

That's all for this episode on problem-solving meetings. We've studied language and expressions for *introducing a problem*, *breaking it down*, *building consensus* and *stating the problem as a challenge*.

See you next time, and thanks for listening!

Language Review

A. Introducing a problem

Put the jumbled sentences in order to practice useful phrases for introducing a problem.

1. everyone's a problem turn let's mind on to that's
2. need right we tackle away this to problem
3. this immediately is we issue with to deal have an
4. problem we're today to a pressing going look at fairly

B. Supporting a point

To review useful language for supporting a point, fill in the blanks in the phrases below with words from the box.

remember	exactly	absolutely	nail
agree	more	right	finger

1. You've really hit the _____ on the head.
2. Yes, I _____ that's how it was.
3. He couldn't be _____ right.
4. They're _____ right.
5. That's _____ what I've been thinking.
6. You've put your _____ on the root problem.
7. That's _____, we used to do it differently.
8. I couldn't _____ with you more.

Study Strategy

Think about the company you work in. Can you see any obvious problems that are not being dealt with? Have you been with the company long enough to have experienced problems and seen how they were resolved by management? Have you ever participated in a meeting that was held to discuss a problem the company was facing? See if you can make a list of a few problems that you have seen or see at work. Next, with a colleague or a friend, try the following role play: Introduce one of the problems on the list and discuss what is really causing the problem. When you have identified the root cause of the surface problem, state the problem as a challenge. Try to use the language and strategies we have practiced in this episode. Alternatively, if you don't know anyone to try this with, write it out as a dialog.

Answers

Listening Questions

1. Kathryn and her team can see that there is low staff morale throughout the company.
2. The group decides that the true cause of low staff morale is because staff are separated into three different locations and have lost touch with each other. This physical separation occurred 2 years previously, when the company was expanding.
3. The challenge the group faces at the end of this episode is to find a way to improve staff morale without spending too much money, that is, without spending “a fortune”.

Language Review

A. Introducing a Problem

1. Let's turn to a problem that's on everyone's mind.
2. We need to tackle this problem right away.
3. This is an issue we have to deal with immediately.
4. We're going to look at a fairly pressing problem today.

B. Supporting a Point

1. You've really hit the **nail** on the head.
2. Yes, I **remember** that's how it was.
3. He couldn't be **more** right.
4. They're **absolutely** right.
5. That's **exactly** what I've been thinking.
6. You've put your **finger** on the root problem.
7. That's **right**, we used to do it differently.
8. I couldn't **agree** with you more.

Online Practice

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